



SELF-HELP GROUPS: CHANGING THE DYNAMICS OF TEA TRIBE COMMUNITY WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN SONITPUR DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Women Empowerment is a vast concept in itself with various branches which emerges through various means and process for women in establishing a strong position in the society. Women in the society still stand in the last mile away group in various sectors in the society. With the advent of Modernization, they are gradually raising their standards through various means and building an individual identity of their own in the society. Women of vulnerable community are more prone to exclusion and exploitation in the society. Tea tribe community women are more vulnerable social group in the state of Assam facing ethnicity crisis and identity crisis as women. The formation of various Self- Help Groups for women is one of the various means of empowering this vulnerable group of women in the rural society. Women Self- Help Groups are changing the dynamics of the status of tea tribe community women in both social and economic fields. They are producing social entrepreneurs from this institution of women in the rural society who are building a different identity apart from their ethnicity. Women social entrepreneurs from this vulnerable community are transforming the rural society and their community especially through these institutions. Women social entrepreneurs through Self-Help groups are representing themselves as leaders of change for all women socially and economically. Self- Help Groups provides platform for women to explore various ways or means of solving problems related to development with innovative and new methods. Similarly, this Paper, has given emphasis on the role of Self-Help Groups in producing Women Social Entrepreneurs from the Tea tribe community women despite of their marginality and their contribution in the socioeconomic growth locally of Tezpur region of Sonitpur District of Assam.

KEYWORDS: Self-Help Groups, Social Entrepreneurs, Women Empowerment, Tea-tribe Community.

INTRODUCTION:

Women in India belonging from varied communities play an important role in the society. From Historical period to the present modern period, Women of different communities have seen representing themselves as independent individual in the patriarchal Indian Society from the early period. Women consist of around 50% of the global population. They are gradually transforming themselves into an important asset in all the sectors whether it is science and technology, politics, business etc. Not generally women, but women from the marginalized communities like the tea tribe community women from Assam who was looked down as an "Invisible Hand" in the lives of the family and their spouses are also representing their individualized identity and their community in particular in various sectors of the society. Earlier this marginalized community women were recognized as homemaker have transformed their misrecognition with a new identity of breadwinner too.

The tea tribe community of Assam who were bought as laborers for the British companies for the tea plantation industry is a patriarchal community where women of this community had no freedom to exercise their own decisions. But now, the scenario have changed for the women, as more women from this community are coming out of their shell and raising their voices to be heard in the global field. They are reaching milestones in every phase of their life. There are many tea tribe community women who despite of their socioeconomic conditions are participating more in every sectors equally with men. They are seen to be more active and curious to learn and experience new challenges and grab opportunities as compared to the men. In today's present society tea tribe community women in Assam are aware of their rights and leave no stone unturned to claim those rights. These women are transforming the lives of the other women from their community who are still dependent on the male counterparts for making decisions. This is a kind of in-group favoring Bias an approach by Henry Tajfel and John Turner where individuals tend to build a social group among themselves and is biased for other individuals for the welfare of their own group. Through this approach, the tea tribe community women in Assam are transforming the lives of their own community and the society too.

In Assam, Women of this community are being discriminated or misrecognised as weak and vulnerable by the native Assamese society. The Assamese society identifies them as marginalized labour class who only fits or is credible for the tea plantation work and other unorganized sector labour. They are excluded from various opportunities based on their ethnicity. In Assam, Caste and Class based conflict is less as compared to ethnic conflict.

In the Constitution of India, Article 15 of the Fundamental Rights also prohibits the Discrimination on grounds of Religion, Race, Caste, Sex or Place of Birth. The tea tribe communities also known as Adivasi women in other parts of the country are raising a silent movement through various revolutions and have succeeded in it. The influence of this movement has reached the valleys of Assam where various community women live together under the umbrella of Unity is Diversity. Assam is known worldwide for its tea and natural beauty. The tea tribe

community is the most vulnerable and marginalized despite of their contribution in the socioeconomic of the state. In the present period, they are not only dependent on tea plantation industry for employment and are engaged in various formal and informal sectors of the State. The women of this community have also been engaging themselves in various activities apart from participating in Household activities.

The Tea tribes Welfare Department of Assam and India have introduced various Schemes and Policies for the Upliftment of this community and also for empowering the women in the society. This Department has taken the responsibility for the upliftment of the community in all sectors of the State. One of the policies that the Government of India under the banner of National Rural Livelihoods Mission have initiated for empowering the women and the upliftment of the economic sectors of the country through formation of the Self-Help Groups for both Men and Women. This institution was formed especially for the development of the rural areas. The origin of this Institution is from Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, Founded by Mohamed Yunus. It was formed in 1975 in Bangladesh in the initial period which showed positive outcomes from Bangladesh and is still working actively there. In India, NABARD initiated this institution in 1986-1987 for the rural development of the country.

Various states of India have established this institution for the rural development of their villages. As Mahatma Gandhi; Father of our Nation emphasised more importance on developing the Indian Villages both economically and socially so that they are not exploited by others. Similarly, for a country to develop not only the outer shell of the country should improve but the grassroot level development also needs to be exercised i.e. Act locally and Think globally- Motto fits the institutions working for the rural development.

Self- Help Groups (SHGs) are considered that institution which forms a social group of individuals as members of 10-20 for easy access to credits as this institution is linked with Banks who provides credit as microfinance. This way both the Self-Help Groups and the Banking sectors are working in coordination with each other. Self- Help Groups are even formed and working within the villages of the tea tribe community women in Assam. These women despite of their marginality are active participants of these groups. Various Self- Help groups of Women are forming and actively functioning all over the states in India. This Institution acts a facilitator for empowering and uplifting the women of various communities and the rural areas.

Self- Help Groups of women in this community of tea tribe are reproducing Women Social Entrepreneurs who are transforming the economic and social sectors of the rural environment in Assam. The term Entrepreneur has been derived from the French word *entreprendre* means to undertake. The term entrepreneur may be defined as a person who combines capital and labor for production.

According to Cole, Entrepreneurship is the purposeful activity of an individual undertaken to initiate, maintain of aggrandize profit by production or distribution

of economic goods and services.

Women Entrepreneurs from this community play a very important role in the field of social and economic sectors in the rural development. Emmerij (1995) said, "Too much social without sufficient

Economic leads to bankruptcy and an end to growth; too much economic without sufficient social leads to social unrest and also to an end to growth." Women Social Entrepreneurs through this various Self- Help Groups are not only bring change through their innovative ideas the social environment but also the Economic growth. These tea tribe Community women are nowadays recognized as social entrepreneurs who are Independent and forming a new identity for themselves as social entrepreneurs for the rural society and the community.

Women of this community are taking responsibility of their community development and the rural society. These tea tribe community women who are closely connected to nature have even taken the responsibility to protect the environment through various sustainable activities in the Self – Help Groups. As said, "With great power come great responsibilities". This institution has given the women the power to take their own social and financial decisions for their family, community and also for the society she resides. Empowerment means not only providing the rights and facilities for the marginalized, but to make that individual teach to fight for their own rights and freedom. There are three forms of Empowerment; Power to- which is the Individual Power or control, Power with- is the collective power and Power within is the Capacity of the individual. Self- Help groups of this community in some circumstances are seen to lack in the collective power and in capacity to continue with the institution.

According to Helen Keller, "Alone we can do so little, together we can do much" sums up the main objective of the Self- Help Groups as they are the tools for socioeconomic growth of the rural society and the community the women represents. Now Self- Help Groups of women for the tea tribe community have opened a new platform for Women Social Entrepreneurs from the marginalized section to make a difference in the society with a new identity in Assam.

AREA OF THE STUDY:

The area of the study is compressed to local level which is Tezpur; a region from Sonitpur District of Assam. Tezpur is a historical place situated on the Banks of River Brahmaputra. The name Tezpur is derived from the Sanskrit words "Teza" meaning blood and "Pura" meaning town or city.

The purpose of selecting Tezpur from other regions of Sonitpur District is because the area is famous for Tea Plantations. The region is surrounded with a number of small and large tea gardens in the District. The population of Tea tribe community in these gardens and outside of these gardens is more as compared to the other places of this District.

Sonitpur is a prominent district which stands among the largest districts in Assam. In terms of Area, it is the second-largest district of Assam after Karbi Anglong District. It is spread on the Northern Banks of the Brahmaputra, the life-line of Assam. Sonitpur district has more number of tea gardens and tea production industries both small and big in Assam as compared to the other districts. Here, also since the colonial period onwards, tea community workers have been migrating from within the states of India as plantation workers/laborers (District Census Handbook, Sonitpur, 2011).

Tezpur with its tea tribe community villages Baithabhang, Dhekidal, Panbari falling under the Gram Panchayat Ghoramari are those tea tribe community populations who have shifted their occupation and their residence from the tea plantation gardens. The other sections who are still within the gardens are the Sonabeel TE which falls under the Niz Gariamari Gram Panchayat. There are two sections of tea tribe community in Tezpur; one who has assimilated themselves with the natives and resides in villages outside of the tea gardens and the other is that tea tribe community who are residing within the tea gardens of Tezpur.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the socioeconomic contribution of the Tea tribe community Women through Self- Help Groups in Tezpur.
2. To study the role of Self- Help Groups in the formation of Women social Entrepreneurs from the tea tribe community in Tezpur.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

According to Karl Polanyi in his book "The Great Transformation" (1944), he emphasises the presence of both market and society for the development of both the sectors as "Market Society". The market is unworthy if there is no society and society is also unworthy without market. Similarly, For Self- Help Groups of Women of tea tribe community, the institution requires financial assets for the development of the rural society and the members which is provided by several rural banks who are benefitted economically and also benefitting the society through these groups. The transformation requires the coordination of both the finance and the society.

Women as Social Entrepreneurs are balancing both the sides and are also bridg-

ing the gap between the market and the society through these institutions.

(Fraser, 2000) examines how the identity model of recognition is deeply flawed. Both theoretically deficient and politically problematic, it equates the politics of recognition with identity politics and, in doing so, encourages both the reification of group identities and the displacement of the politics of redistribution, important to the structure of welfare economics advocated in our major policy decisions.

She even emphasises on how status model of recognition is similar to distinct dimension of recognition where recognition is related to the social norms of the individuals and the distribution to the economic norms of the individual in the society, similar to Weberian conception on class as an economic category and Marxian Conception on class as a social category.

Sintayehu Hailu Alemu, Luuk Van Kempen & Ruerd Ruben in their article Women Empowerment through Self-Help Groups: The Bittersweet Fruits of Collective Apple Cultivation in Highland Ethiopia (2018) emphasised on the Self-Help Groups of Ethiopian Women through their active participation are empowering the women of different tribes in the community level through their collective apple cultivation which are producing positive outcomes in their business. Through this cultivation women are developing their rural livelihoods socially and economically. The initial challenges that they were facing was male backlash from their spouses.

According to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) are trying to increase their level of Entrepreneurial start-up efforts by helping women by encouraging them to engage in more entrepreneurial activities and be role models for other women in general to be successful women Entrepreneurs.

Swapna Dutta in her article Women Entrepreneurship Development through Self Help Group in Assam (2016) discusses on the challenges and constraints that the Women Social Entrepreneurs come across while handling the financial activities and various social taboos from the society.

Roy (2014) in the article "The Dynamics of SHG Business Model and Women Empowerment:

A Study on the Scheduled Caste Women in the Sonitpur District of Assam" have emphasised the business model of SHG with respect to Scheduled Caste women in Sonitpur District of Assam. The results in the study showed that the SHG in this region have revealed the improvement level of Income in the Scheduled Caste Women and the empowerment through the business model of SHG in Sonitpur District.

Saravanan (2016) in the article "the impact of self-help groups on the socio-economic development of rural household women in Tamil nadu - a study" explains the impact of Self- help Groups in empowering the Socio economic status of Women in Tamil Nadu. The SHG of Women in Tamil Nadu are empowering the poor and the weaker Households of women through various socioeconomic ways have become significant in nature as this institution in this state are taking a silent movement in form to transform and change the lives of the poor women.

Suprabha K.R (2014) in the article "Empowerment of Self Help Groups (SHGs) towards Microenterprise Development" emphasised on the Self Help Groups playing a significant role in the development of the micro enterprise. This institution has also taken the initiative to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals of Alleviating Poverty from the rural areas through this institution. This institution promotes the self employment through various micro finance institutions in the rural Development. The study area of Dakshina Kannada district and Shimoga district have been taken for the study purpose where various micro financial Institutions were formed with the help of the Self- Help Groups in both the districts.

There are various literatures on the role of Self- Help Groups by various researchers but not much literature has been witnessed on Self- help Groups as the platform of producing Women Social Entrepreneurs as another significant role this institution play and with respect to tea tribe community women in Assam who are vulnerable and marginalized ethnic group in comparison to other native communities of Assam.

METHODOLOGY:

Descriptive survey method was used for the study on Self- Help groups producing Women social entrepreneurs from the tea tribe community in Tezpur and the socio economic contribution for the development of the region.. In-depth interviews and discussions were organized among the tea tribe community self help Group members from selective Groups with majority women belonging from the community. The secondary sources were also referred from various journals, articles, magazines, web etc. The interviews questionnaire was semi- structured in form.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS:

According to the secondary Sources of National Rural Livelihoods Mission Report, Assam has 33 districts, 219 Blocks and 258772 numbers of Self-Help

Groups of women. Sonitpur District is one of the Districts of Assam with 10525 Self –Help Groups of Women of which Scheduled Caste – 816, Scheduled Tribes- 1380, Minority- 2538 and others- 5791 and 7 blocks.

The survey study is from the Block Balipara from Tezpur of Sonitpur District. Balipara consists of 2040 number of Self- Help Groups of Women with Scheduled Caste- 77, Scheduled Tribe- 342, Minority- 486 and others- 1135. Balipara has 18 Gram Panchayat of which Ghoramari Panchayat have 10 villages under it with 106 Self–Help Groups of Women, Scheduled caste- 2, Scheduled Tribe- 43, Minority- 2 and Others- 59.

From 10 Villages of Ghoramari Panchayat, 3 villages are selected for the study with majority of Tea tribe community Population. They are Baithabhanga, Dhekidal, Panbari with 9, 18 and 1 Self-Help Groups of Women Respectively.

Baithabhanga Village has Scheduled Tribe-1, Others-8 Self-Help Groups; Dhekidal with Scheduled tribe- 12, Minority- 2 and others- 4 and Panbari with others-1 Self –Help Groups.

1. Baithabhanga- Durga SHG- others- 10; This Self- Help Group is a 10 member group of Women who belong from both Tea tribe community tribe and Muslim. Mostly Tea tribe communities in Assam fall under the category of Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Caste unlike other states consisting of Adivasi community falling under Scheduled tribe. The date of formation of this group was 1/11/2015 and most of them have BPL and APL cards according to their family condition. This group is linked to the Assam Gramin Vikash Bank providing credit to the poor rural families for their individual and collective development with 2% interest which becomes accessible for the individual to take loans as compared to any direct loans from the Banks. Self – help Group makes the banking system affordable and accessible for the rural society and the families of the members. This Group Consists of a President, Secretary and Treasurer. There is no biasness in the selection of this post as after every 3 years every woman gets an opportunity to make decisions and be leader of the Group. Most of the women of this group are wage labour and Brick kiln Worker who are in a very marginalized condition and so the push factors from the family condition have made them participate in this group activities with monthly collection of Rs.100 from each member and from which they would be able to take internal loan in any emergency situation and invest that money in any productive group activities. Most of them are also engaged in this group as these groups are connected indirectly to the Gram Panchayat and these Panchayat act as the facilitator of Schemes and policies of Government to the Self- help Groups.

On interviewing women from this SHG, most of them are satisfied and are asking for more improvement in the implementation of the policies from the Government.

Saraswati SHG: This group consists of 10 members from both Tea tribe Community Women and Muslim Women. This Group was formed in 1/2/2016 and it is also linked to the Grameen Vikash Bank. The women in this group are both BPL and APL card holders. These Group women have invested the grant from the Government in construction of their roads for better transportation and communication. They have even utilized the grants in Angadwadis for the health and well being of women and children.

On interviewing the women from this Group, they mentioned about being engaged financially and socially by bringing the government schemes on Scholarships for the students of the tea tribe community in their village. They even engaged the job card holder wage laborer through the MNREGA in providing them with employment regarding any development from the Group.

2. Dhekidal Village have many ST category Self- help Groups and Tea tribe Community Self- help Groups.

Jyoti ASG is one of the Self- help groups in this Village where the women of the groups have started in engaging in Vermi compost within the group members and is still active in process. This group was formed in 1/8/2013. This group have provided employment through this initiative to various women wage earner from their community in employment. During Covid 19 this group was given responsibility of making masks along with other Self- Help Groups from the Panchayat and distributes it in the village for free. The materials for the Vermi Compost initially were provided by the Patanjali Company which is situated in the village.

Rashmi SHG: This Self –help Group consists of majority from the tea tribe community women. It is equally active as compared to other Self- Help groups in the village. It was formed in the year 25/06/2016. Through this Group, The tea tribe community women have established themselves as an independent individual who are not only engaged in financial activities of the group but also of the family. This group have also engaged in giving individual loans to the members for various purposes like Horticulture, cow feeding, fishery, pig feeding etc with the help of the Gramin Banks it is linked with and also with very less interest.

3. Panbari is a majority tea tribe community village with only one Self- help Group under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. Although there are other small groups of women which works like Self help groups of Women and are directly the groups formed by any private or commercial Banks like Bandhan Bank initiated Bandhan group giving loans for small enterprise to the individuals.

Pratibha SHG: This group consists of 11 members of majority Tea Tribe community women. Its formation was in 15/2/11. This group is active in various activities. The women here are aware of every opportunities introduced for the village and their community and bring those opportunities in implementation for the development of their village and the people. Despite of individual development many community or collective action is seen from the Group; construction of village roads under the Panchayat schemes, Mini Bank within the village for savings, community temple (Namghar), engaging in Angadwadis, education, building free houses, sanitary latrines, free electricity for the marginalized section etc. The women here engage themselves actively not only in the community activities but also in political activities.

The other Gram Panchayat of the same Block Balipara is Niz Goroimari consisting of Village Niz Goroimari and Sonabeel TE which falls in the Tea estate.

1. Village Niz Goroimari consists of both Scheduled caste and Other Backward Class population under which the tea tribe community falls. One section of the Niz Goroimari village where tea tribe community is in majority is in a marginalized condition as compared to others of the community. Initially they were not engaged and willing to engage themselves in any Self- Help Groups as most of them were Wage laborer in the village who earns their income with difficulty. But later on they realized the importance of the institution and have come forward to uplift their situation through this Group. They became aware that these Groups are the facilitator of various policies of Government and through this they would be able to claim their rights and financially also they would become stable as it is linked with the Banks.

Krishna SHG: This is one of the Self – help Groups of Women and is recently formed in 20/9/2019 under National Rural Livelihoods Mission lined to UCO Bank. Majority women are from the BPL category as they are poor and casual labour. As this group is new in nature, it has been introduced to various new schemes and policies of the Government regarding community activities and development.

Sonabeel TE: This is the tea estate area which also covers the Niz Goroimari Panchayat with Tea tribe community population of Other Backward Class following both Christianity and Hindu Religion. Majority belong to the BPL category. They get the perks from the tea estate authority and also the Gram Panchayat from the Government so they are considered to be in a much better position as compared to the tea tribe community population who are outside this estate.

1. *Asha Kiran Self- Help Group:* This is one of the many groups in the Tea estate. It was formed in 6/3/2004 under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. This Group is still as active as the others in both financial and social sectors. Most of the activities seen in this estate of this group are Poultry farming, other crops production, and other policies regarding education, health, housing, road construction etc.
2. *Anjali SHG:* This Group consists of 10 members with majority following Christianity religion under National Rural Livelihoods Mission. It was formed in 25/2/2015. This group also engages itself in preaching Christianity and is engaged in missionaries along with other individual and collective activities for the development of the women and the community and in large frame the society.

Every Self- help Groups have their own unique manner of functioning and presenting their community. One common similarity is the collective action that the women engage in through these institutions. Most commonly, every group engages in Horticulture, pig feeding, cow feeding, and fisheries according to their convenience. These villages in the study area are known for Human- elephant Conflict every year during Harvesting Season, where Elephants attack the villagers and damage their houses and their crops. During the interview, the women have from these institutions under various Village Organization are collectively working with the help of Panchayat to build an Elephant Corridor for the Elephants which would not hurt the Elephants and the villagers. These institutions are not only working or bringing change in their individual Socioeconomic lives, community and the society but also the nature as these communities are more connected to Mother Nature.

Many new policies and activities on micro business have been initiated by the institution through the Panchayat; Algae production, Udyan Nirman another nature related activity, Cow Dung Production, Godown construction, Beetal Nut production etc. Funds regarding the activity have been initiated by the Government. Non – Governmental Organizations have also been a part of these develop-

ments in the rural areas.

Sonitpur District has many cases of Witch Hunting among the marginalized communities on the other side and women from this marginalized community are building themselves with strong identity and recognition in the region as Social Entrepreneurs. These Women Social Entrepreneurs through various Self- Help Groups are fighting against this injustice of Women with their knowledge and power. Women Social Entrepreneurs through this various Self- Help Groups are changing the scenario of Women Empowerment through silent Revolution which is powerful and transformative.

CONCLUSION:

Many challenges and constraints are faced by these women social entrepreneurs in empowering the rural society and their individual identity. But still it has been seen that this institutions are functioning and working in an active pace with a lot of enthusiasm and energy from the women. Women from varied communities are breaking the glass ceiling and barriers of stereotypes in the society by building their status and identity as Women Social Entrepreneurs. This institution is playing an important role in transforming the lives of women to entrepreneurs and change makers not only in rural society but also in the whole world. The tea tribe community women in the region of Sonitpur District have stepped into the path of transforming themselves and their community in various sectors whether it is education, health, occupation and economic sectors etc. This community women are gradually breaking the social taboos of their marginality through the institution of Self- helps Groups and empowering themselves politically, socially and economically through their leadership and knowledge in the society. Women play a significant role in society and economic development of the region.

“To call woman the weakest sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman.

If by strength is meant brute strength,

Then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior.”- Mahatma Gandhi. Women change makers are playing the role of torch bearers for the other women of their community in the society by not providing them all the opportunities but teaching them to claim and fight for the rights they deserve that is empowering.

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